

# Styles of creative input to museum exhibitions

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## Abstract

The paper investigates how opportunities for artistic response arise in the design of museum exhibitions. A process of critical biography is used to reconstruct accounts of two projects undertaken between 1995 and 1998 by Neal Potter, the world-renowned designer of cultural exhibitions.

Potter's concept for the Atrium of the Earth Galleries at the Natural History Museum, London, is presented as an installation concept realized through an industrial process akin to a major theatrical production. As creative director of the 'Walk Through the 20<sup>th</sup> Century' exhibition at the Cultural Centre of Belém, Lisbon, for the 100-day festival preceding Expo '98, Potter created two original art works, one of which subsequently became a formal museum acquisition. One can be interpreted as a direct response to a perceived gap in the narrative, the other as an emotional and aesthetic response to a current event.

These cases allow us to question some of the institutional categories and creative stereotypes that generally underpin the organization and execution of museum exhibition projects. I suggest that the 'visualizer,' 'interpreter,' and 'storyteller' roles that artists may adopt are far from prosaic and at least as useful as those of 'mediator,' 'provocateur,' 'informant' and 'fantasist.'

## Introduction

### Popular culture

In the second half of the twentieth century there was a significant movement amongst historians, artists, writers and, eventually, curators to admit popular culture as a worthy subject of interest. It is still not, however, widely reflected in the work that British museums do and is only slightly more accepted in the USA (Moore, 1997, vii).

Making exhibitions about popular culture is a serious business. Typically the full armoury of museological techniques will be brought to bear. For example, the preservation of the vulnerable fibres and inks used in comic book production requires a specialist conservator and the story of the comic book hero might engage cross-disciplinary research to uncover an historical iconography, mythic structures, social and political interpretations, and the economic dynamics of an industry.

A different question is, to what extent museums contribute to popular culture through the making of exhibitions in general. Was the advent of the blockbuster exhibition in the 1970s, for example, a turning point in this regard in the UK? And does the making of popular exhibitions require a new sensibility, one attuned to a conscious and critical experience of popular culture and a new

mentality, one that engages a more democratic way of thinking about and creating cultural experiences?

Although it is not possible to provide an answer to these questions in a short paper, what I hope to do is use the case of one creative practitioner, Neal Potter, who certainly does exemplify this new sensibility and mentality, to reflect on the consequences for our perspective on the artist as contributor to museum exhibition.

## **Neal Potter**

Neal Potter is a designer of cultural exhibitions. He came to prominence in the late 1980s as the designer of the ground breaking, but now sadly closed, Museum of the Moving Image (MOMI) on London's South Bank. He has since completed major projects in the UK, Europe and Singapore including the British Pavilion at Expo '92 Seville, the Singapore Discovery Centre, the Earth galleries atrium at the Natural History Museum, London, the 'Walk Through the 20<sup>th</sup> Century' exhibition for the 100-day festival preceding Expo '98 Lisbon, and the National Cold War Exhibition at the Royal Air Force Museum, Cosford.

Potter studied exhibition and environmental design at Chesterfield School of Art (1967-71) and construction at Bristol Polytechnic (1971-2). For the first twelve years of his professional career he was a public servant working for the British government as an exhibition designer initially in the Department for Trade and Industry (DTI) and subsequently in the Central Office of Information (COI). After a one-year stint at the International Maritime Satellite organization (INMARSAT) as a project manager he returned to hands-on designing by going 'independent' in 1986 to undertake the MOMI project.

Neal Potter is an atypical subject for two main reasons. Firstly, as an independent practitioner he has taken a hands-on creative role in all of his projects and only rarely employed other designers to supplement his small studio. Secondly, his life and career are very accessible through an autobiography, lecture transcriptions, published review articles and over nearly nine hours of recorded interviews.

The autobiography is central to this study. Neal Potter is acutely aware of cultural context. With a gentle wit he references many of the events in his life with lines from pop songs. But further than this, he uses major historical and political events as signposts and milestones, not just in some generalised historical sense but in an intensely personal way that embeds such detail in the way he tells his story.

The context of Potter's educational experience is also worth comment. Potter was born in 1949 and comes from a working class background. He readily admits that he was one of the 'baby-boomer' generation that benefited from the radically reformed post-war educational and welfare systems (note the title of his autobiography). As recently reported, social mobility rose for those baby-boom children born in the period up to 1958 (Blanden & Machin, 2007). Subsequent generations have not had the same advantage. For those born between the late-50s and 1970 it declined sharply to one of the lowest rates amongst advanced nations. In the last 30 years it has not improved (ibid.)

Potter was one of that increasing proportion of children from 'working class' backgrounds who did not follow in the footsteps of their parents. He was able to take advantage of the far wider range of possibilities presented by the educational system. Specifically, study at art school and university was made possible by the availability of generous discretionary awards for the former and mandatory grants for the latter. This was a period of significant expansion. New universities were founded in the 1960s; in the 1970s, polytechnics, offering nationally validated degrees, were created from the amalgamation of diverse colleges including art schools and architecture schools. It is also apparent that, in the expansion of art education in the 1960s and 70s and its embrace by broader-based institutes of higher education, primarily the new polytechnics, 'design' became an arena of creative practice increasingly distinct from that of 'art'.

### **Exhibition making: three traditions of practice**

This division between art and design remains, in one sense, an artificial one, an observation we can substantiate with reference to the practices embraced by the process of creating exhibitions. There are three main traditions of practice, which tend to be accommodated by cultural institutions in rather different ways. These practices are most easily identified with the rôle of the lead creative in the exhibition making process: the curator, the artist or the designer.

The curatorial tradition takes an approach which emphasises content over presentation, and display over interpretation. In the case of art exhibitions this involves entering into dialogue with one or more artists to elicit creative responses to a theme or intellectual challenge. In the case of collection-based museums, such as those dealing with archaeology, social history and natural history, it involves researching and writing a narrative which informs the curatorial decisions on the disposition of artefacts in the space and the production of exhibition labels.

The artistic tradition takes an approach which emphasises the artist's aesthetic and intellectual concerns in the presentation of their own and others' work. In the case of art exhibitions this tends to involve the creation of an installation as a work of art or as a framing device for the work of others. In other types of museum it tends to involve cutting across the norms of collection organization to engage in the exploration of themes and ideas by more eclectic means, often with a critical edge in respect of those institutional norms. It may also involve the insertion of original art into the mix of collection material as markers, signposts, provocations and reflections on the exhibition theme.

The designer tradition takes an approach which emphasises the client's interests in communicating purposefully with an audience. In the case of art exhibitions galleries are generally reluctant to engage in overt interpretation and the structuring of communications in the exhibition environment but when they do the designer's approach tends to involve the introduction of explicit narrative and thematic devices and the exploitation of a range of communication technologies. When designers produce exhibitions for other types of museum in principle there are few limits on the scenographic and technological approaches that may be employed to create an effective communicative environment for the visiting public.

The artificial nature of the divide between the artist and the designer may not immediately be apparent from the above characterizations of their exhibition making practices. However, if one

considers the common experience of the generation of exhibition designers and artists who passed through art colleges in the 1960s and 70s, it becomes more apparent that their approaches have certain common traits and indeed often crossover into each other's 'territory'.

Michael Wright, one-time project director with Heritage Projects, York, went to art school and studied fine art and initially practiced as a sculptor. He became interested in creating immersive installations. No matter how complex and collaborative the productions became he regarded himself, first and always, an artist. His attitude was that there was no better way to produce art and have hundreds of thousands of people see 'his' work.

Neal Potter, world-renowned designer of cultural exhibitions, went to art school and studied exhibition design and construction. He has always practiced as a designer and became interested in creating immersive installations. No matter how complex and collaborative the productions became he regarded himself, first and always, a designer. His attitude is that there is no better way to work and have audiences share his insatiable interest in cultural 'subject matters'.

It would be easy to make something of these differences in practice and attitude that simply reinforces stereotypes. What is more useful is to describe the variety of approaches that contribute to viable interdisciplinary practices in making museum exhibitions.

It depends whether one thinks of a medium as a physical thing or as a cultural construct, a system into which one can choose to participate. There are artists who are traditionally committed to a subject, as in the Royal Academy tradition of 'find your subject and stick to it'. But there are many more artists who are just compulsive makers, in love with the idea of using certain materials or in love with the idea of working in a particular kind of milieu. There are others who regard subject and medium as, at best, secondary interests, rather they inhabit a world of philosophical speculation and for them the 'concept' is the work. This is also the space into which many designers thrust themselves over and above regarding the expressed interests of the client organization as central to the creative work of making an exhibition.

### **Artists as one kind of practitioner?**

So, the first thing to question is the idea that artists who work for museums on projects of one sort or another can all be thought of as the same sort of practitioner. Clearly, they can not be lumped together. Equally some artists and some designers evolve practices that are virtually indistinguishable, whilst others remain poles apart philosophically and in terms of the skills and techniques they employ in their exhibition making.

I am particularly intrigued by the relationship that certain artists have had with a variety of exhibition making situations, situations that were not at all about putting the artist's work on public display, but rather, were much larger multidisciplinary projects and focussed on using a collection and bringing a wide range of media to bear on telling a story. There is a different kind of dynamic when the artist is one amongst many specialists brought in to add a particular element of interpretation to the overall mix.

This interest reveals something about my own background as a former museum designer and, for the past twenty-odd years, an academic teaching and researching exhibition design.

Heterogeneous collections – ones combining, for example, materials as diverse as technology, natural history, anthropology, social history and art – offer endless possibilities for telling explicit and complex stories. Display, the dominant technique in the art museum, is simply inadequate as a strategy for addressing the challenges that other types of museum present. From one perspective, the curatorial rôle has been fragmented; no longer is the curator expected to be able to execute every task in making an exhibition. From another it has been professionalized and transformed into a coordinating rôle with responsibility for quality control. Whichever way one looks at it, however, on any but the simplest of art exhibitions, the curator will be one amongst several specialists who need to collaborate to get things done, rather than an auteur who draws on a little technical assistance from time to time.

Individual architects still tend to get the credit for producing buildings, even though everyone knows that even quite modest sized buildings involve many people in the design, specification and production processes. The credit for a film tends to go to its director. Similarly, there is a tendency amongst critics and colluding museums to credit individual curators with producing exhibitions. It is historical shorthand, of course, but it is also a way of burying the truth about such creative practice: most exhibition making relies on cooperation; much of it is collaborative (Macdonald, 2002, 91ff).

I tend to think that it is a mistake to regard any exhibition as the work of a single creative individual, whether that person is considered, or considers themselves, a curator, an artist, or a designer (or for that matter an organizer or an educator). Ideas for exhibitions can come from anywhere and the person proposing an exhibition project is as likely to get the idea from somewhere else as from within their own experience and knowledge. Once an idea has been floated and turned into a project, things change very rapidly.

### **Idea and concept in the exhibition making process**

Creative leadership is a slippery rôle, a large part of which is about organizing people rather than, in any real sense, controlling the realization of the original idea, whatever that may have been. Exhibition projects evolve and do so very rapidly at the beginning. A good idea for an exhibition has to be, by its very nature, open to a variety of possible interpretations. This is where it is useful to differentiate between the ‘idea’ and the ‘concept’ for an exhibition.

An idea can be adequately expressed in words; the idea talks about subject, intention, time and place, scope of content, narrative possibility, etc. The concept, on the other hand, is a nascent structure, in the abstract a template, a big idea expressed in terms of metaphor or image or system or model; the concept can relate the complexity of a project in such a way as to offer guiding principles, a canvas on which others can paint in the knowledge that the picture will add up to something. A good exhibition concept provides a sense of direction and invites creative collaboration.

The other key difference between idea and concept is that, although in principle, an idea for an exhibition can come from anywhere, an exhibition concept can only really be devised by someone with exhibition making expertise, that is, a curator (perhaps in the specialist guise of organizer or educator), an artist, or a designer, with the right kind of experience. And some people, like Neal

Potter, are particularly good at devising exhibition concepts.

## **Aim of the paper**

This paper concentrates on the work of one individual. The aim of its focussed style of narrative investigation is to reveal a number of subtle layers to the investigation of an issue, the rôle of the artist as a communicator in the museum environment. In the terms of the conference theme the word 'communicator' is used to embrace the ideas of 'mediator,' 'provocateur,' 'informant' and 'fantasist,' which is a useful bit of shorthand, a portmanteau term, if you will. However, the dimensions of the communicator's rôle that emerge here to some extent contradict these expectations and yet are at once more obvious, the artist as 'visualizer,' 'interpreter' and 'storyteller'.

## **Methodological Notes**

### **Recall and attitudes to the past**

The subject's powers of recall are clearly very important to the outcome of this study. When the subject is such a major contributor to the content of the research this raises a crucial question about the subject's attitude to the past. Cox and Hassard (2007: 475-97) usefully categorise retrospective research in terms of four contrasting attitudes to the past. Such research can seek either to *control* or *interpret* or *co-opt* or *represent* the past.

*Controlling* the past is about recall; it implies that given the right research tools, there is an objective truth in the past which can be uncovered; this leads to essentially descriptive accounts. *Interpreting* the past implies that the past is unrecoverable but may be reconstructed and that this reconstruction is the interminable achievement of sense-making activities. *Co-opting* the past is about identifying causal links between present conditions and past events and as such seeks a type of rational explanation. *Representing* the past involves a play with narrative possibilities associated with different models of time and space; in this there is no assumption that past and present are discreet and separated.

In his autobiography Potter does not simply record the facts as he remembers them; his is not a controlling attitude to the past. Potter is conscious of the chance occurrences, the turns of good fortune and bad luck that have given his career its peculiar shape, and would be the last to suggest that it could or should be recounted as a rational story of causally linked events; his attitude therefore is not one of co-opting the past. In his story there is a consistent and traditional chronological framework to which the layers he constructs relate. Historical and contextual references always appear through the same lens, that of experiential sensibility; he only references what directly impinges on his consciousness. This is not to suggest that Potter in any way denies the influence of learning and critical reflection on the way he chooses to tell his story, only that he consciously avoids the playing off of one framing against another. Potter would regard playing with narrative styles to represent the past in one way rather than another as an indulgence at best and at worst dishonest. What Potter does is consciously build a picture in layers in the hope that 'the reader can overlay the layers and find a human being hidden somewhere in there' (Potter, 2000, 5). His approach is thematic, constantly seeking to relate the personal to contextual detail and historical trend. He sees himself as interpreting the past and explicitly asks the reader to

become an interpreter with him. What applies to the subject in producing autobiography equally applies to the researcher in transforming this into critical biography. This researcher accepts the subject's invitation to become co-interpreter and, therefore, to adopt an interpreting attitude to the past.

### **Relationship between subject and researcher**

This raises the crucial question of the relationship between the subject and the researcher. Essers has argued that, in research that takes a narrative approach, life stories are co-produced by interviewer and interviewee (2009, 163-81). When out in the field, so to speak, there is a kind of inevitability about this process; the more extended the interactions between researcher and subject become, the more it is likely that each will adapt in some way to the expectations of the other. Although some of the cautionary techniques outlined by Essers are valuable in the present study they are less necessary than might normally be the case. This paper draws on one principal subject, one very well known to the researcher, even before any formal interviews began. However, the potential distortions that might have arisen as a result of co-production of the life-story are minimized because a significant proportion of the content of the interviews can be checked against two key manuscripts: a full transcript of a contemporary lecture on the 'Walk Through the 20<sup>th</sup> Century' exhibition project completed in 1998 and a book-length autobiography written independently in 2000.

### **Limitations of method**

In this study the researcher is working with the limitations of these cross-referencing possibilities. Future study will include reference to documentary evidence in institutional archives and published sources. This will subtly change the character of the study from one based on 'recounted life story' to one based on 'contextualized critical biography'; I see this as an evolution of method. Both stages of the method, however, fall within the tradition of the humanities, in seeking a contextualized understanding of the subject, his motivations, actions and inner life, rather than of the social sciences, which seek an understanding of social structures and processes.

### **Ethical considerations**

The ethical dimension of the researcher's rôle raises two further issues: what one is authorized to recount and with what consequences (Quattrone, 2006, 143-57) and the question of solidarity. Rorty argues that solidarity ultimately depends upon imagination not dogma. To define what it is to be 'one of us' is not to define the root of solidarity. Quite the reverse, by reciprocation it simultaneously defines what it is to be 'not one of us' and thereby institutionalizes 'us and them' attitudes and subverts any latent drive for solidarity (1989: 189-90). It seems that whenever hegemony emerges, whatever form it takes; it represents differential power, the opportunity for resistance, the hope of escaping 'institutionally imposed boundaries' (Rhodes, 2000: 10). In the spirit of the conference, therefore, this paper is open to the diversity of creative participation in museum exhibition in terms of attitude and process. In presenting certain oppositional ideas, it invites others in the hope of deferring premature attempts at synthesis.

### **Summary**

This paper focuses on questioning perceptions of the exhibition maker as artist or curator or designer. It proceeds from the assumption that, although, strictly speaking, the past is 'unrecoverable,' it may be reconstructed through an interminable process of 'sense-making'. In this, two factors define the relationship between the subject and the author. Firstly, the subject is disinterested in theorizing. Secondly, the author openly adopts a critical position in relation to the subject's retrospection (as well as the more orthodox documentary material encountered), which creates the opportunity to 'draw attention to or disrupt prevailing discourses of the past or historicize and politicize present order, pointing to potential for future action, emancipation or transformative redefinition' (Cox & Hassard, 2007, 482). Such a process clearly serves present interests in that it contributes to the project of (re)constructing an identity for the exhibition design discipline and, in this regard, of adding to the fund of stories that we find useful in (re)shaping the world. Rorty refers to this as the 'redescription of what we ourselves are like' and the endless task of 'proliferating realization' (1989, xvi). In terms of the Cox and Hassard framework, it is an engagement with the process of 'interpreting the past' cast in the light of dealing with the contingent limitations of the resources available. And as Plummer put it '...the researcher ...is willing to comment upon, interpret and organize "the stories" into a more unified whole. Theorizing becomes commentary, criticism, synthesis, theme, metaphor' (1983, 120).

## **Autobiographical Sources**

Exhibition studies generally address the physical content and narrative structure of particular exhibitions set in a specific cultural context. They are usually expositive rather critical in respect to the exhibition itself and generally take the form of essays in exhibition catalogues. There are some exhibition studies, such as those by Greenberg, Ferguson & Nairne (1996), Macdonald (1998) and Luke (2002) that also reflect on the politics of curating and organizing exhibitions, although not many address the form and appearance, and the communicative experience of the exhibition in the way that several authors in Ames, Franco & Frye (1992) attempt. Those that address critically the process of designing and making exhibitions taking a more humanistic or ethnographic perspective are rarer still; Hollein (1989) and Macdonald (2002) are notable in this regard. Few designers have attempted to write such rounded studies, and those that have, have generally done so less critically and in one of two peripheral senses. They have either produced, like Bertron, Schwartz & Frey (2006), a promotional or, like Gardner (1993), an autobiographical account of their work.

Potter's autobiography is arguably the broadest and most critically reflective such study. It was written, during a lengthy hiatus, to celebrate his fiftieth birthday and the turning of the new millennium (they happened to coincide). Potter published it as an e-book, initially for an audience of family, friends and professional collaborators. However, it is clear from the introduction that ultimately Potter is addressing a much wider, future readership.

...I have lived through great changes: personal, social, musical, educational, health and work related. My generation has not had to fight a war and we 'have never had it so good.' I thought someone, someday, somewhere, might find it interesting. I would certainly have



liked to know what my ancestors thought or how they lived. Perhaps future generations will take some pleasure from these words or recognise some genetic traight [sic] (Potter, 2000, 5).

Such writing can be overly anecdotal and somewhat self-indulgent (cf. Gardner, 1993). Potter's approach is more measured and reflective; as well as telling a structured chronological story, his autobiography relates parallel and embedded stories that are thematic and contextual about time, place, music, health, politics, education, work, money, religion and food. This reflects Potter's unusually vivid historical consciousness, which has successfully reduced the distance one would expect to find between personal and public histories.

## **Case Studies: London 1996 and Lisbon 1998**

The 'Work' section of Potter's autobiography provides a detailed account of each of his exhibition projects between 1986, when he started designing MOMI, and 1999, which concluded with eight months' lucrative work in Singapore on a project that did not go into production. Other source material includes almost nine hours of interviews conducted in April 2007 and a full transcript of the lecture 'Crisis Design: A Walk Through the 20<sup>th</sup> Century'.

The interviews were used to flesh out a range of formative experiences and the names and roles of various mentors and colleagues, to clarify the chronology of projects up to 2007, to use drawings catalogued by the researcher (Matthews, 2007) to elicit detailed accounts of design process and other reminiscences, and to engage the subject in reflecting on design practice and design philosophy. The lecture was part of the introduction to a Master Class led by Neal Potter in 1998 on the theme of dealing with potentially catastrophic turns of events during exhibition projects. The lecture provides a detailed account of the design and production of the exhibition held at the Cultural Centre of Belém in Lisbon earlier that year.

The Earth Galleries atrium project at the Natural History Museum, London is dealt with on pages 159-64 of the autobiography and in interviews B, E, G & I, and the 'Walk Through the 20<sup>th</sup> Century' exhibition project on pages 167-71, in interviews B, E & I, and in the lecture.

### **Case 1: The Earth galleries atrium**

In 1994 the Natural History Museum, London, started planning how to redevelop the Earth galleries in what had formerly been the separate Geological Museum. For practical as well as financial reasons the project was subdivided into separate briefs for the second and first floor galleries and the entrance level and vertical circulation atrium project. A number of museum design and architectural practices were invited to pitch competitively for each project. Neal Potter was one of four practices invited to come up with ideas for the atrium.

A typical museum exhibition requires a number of key exhibit concepts to carry the structure of a potentially quite complex narrative. The atrium project was different, '...they wanted something

that would set off the whole concept of the new Earth Galleries' (Potter, 2007, E 00:18:08ff). What this required was a big idea, a spectacular, multi-sensory exhibit concept that would communicate a single powerful message and resolve the practical problem of how to deliver the visitor to the second-floor galleries where the detailed story of the earth sciences would begin.

The nature of the problem makes the creative challenge much more like that of conceiving a singular art work, like a painting or a sculpture, than of conceiving a vehicle or conceptual structure to carry a narrative, which is akin to preparing a treatment and storyboarding a movie.

## Exhibit concept visualization

In Potter's words:

So, I started putting a scheme together, and it's hard; this one's quite interesting. 'Cause, it's not like MOMI where there are lots of ideas, lots of different environments. There's like one big area and there are two specific things I remember about putting the scheme together. The first one was how much I used to love going to the 'Story of the Earth' in the old Geology Museum, by James Gardner. You know, you walk through the rock face and the first thing you saw as you went through there was, ...a huge diorama of all the planets, the Earth in space, and all done with ultraviolet light. And, that's it, they've missed that out, it's not in the brief. They haven't put the Earth in space, they haven't ...put it in context. They've talked about the Earth doing its own thing, but, they haven't said where it is. And suddenly I had this idea, that the Earth is in space, and we've got all the stars, all the planets and we can ...sandblast those into slate. I thought, this is good; I like this; this is going to work. And then I was in Croydon library doing some research and I was trying to... make it an all-encompassing environment. And it suddenly occurred to me, just, yeh, wrap it right round; make it a globe, simple. Take people through the globe; take them through the Earth that's in space. And that was it, the idea was there, that's all you needed (Potter, 2007, E 00:20:21ff) (Figure 1).

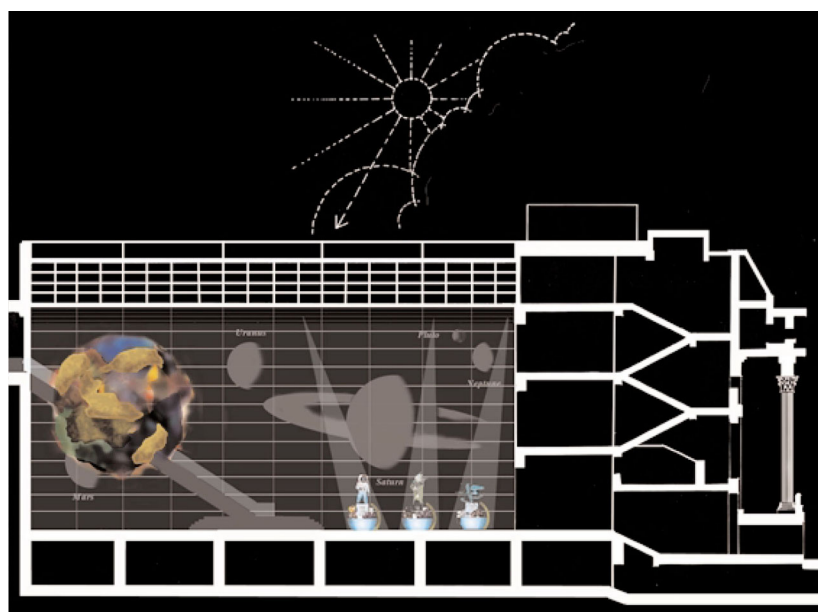


Figure 1 – Potter's presentation visual – a section through the Earth galleries atrium showing the proposed installation. From the entrance on the right it shows a procession through an avenue of sculptures leading to an escalator which rises through the centre of a giant globe representing the Earth in space. The sequence is surrounded by walls etched with the planets and constellations of stars.

In capturing the thought process here Potter illustrates how the idea, as perhaps poorly expressed in the brief provided by the client, is transformed into an exhibit concept. The notion of an immersive installation through which the visitor is transported cannot be left in the abstract; it must be visualized in a singular and powerful way to engage the imagination and communicate a central idea. Where the images come from that enable this visualization to be externalized can be the result of a conscious search, but there can also be an element of reverie or anamnesis.

Back in my junior school days I had won the first prize in an art competition to create a country code poster... On 24 May 1960 I was presented with the prize – a Puffin book "The Sky and Heavens"... On page 16 and 17 of that book you will find the layout of the stars I used for the atrium wall. The images from those pages just dropped into my head when I engaged on the problem. The page was the same format as the wall. Fate? Research? Photographic memory? – Who knows (Potter, 2000, 160).

Once externalized the concept becomes available for elaboration and critical review. As it is subsequently drawn and redrawn it also becomes accessible to others as a creative work, and this is a crucial point in the case of a concept that demands complex industrial-scale production for its realization; realization requires collaboration. This is, perhaps, an obvious point; however, in this type of competitive situation the presentation of a project is about more than ideas, more than the exhibit concept; it is also about confidence and competence. Potter had to show that the concept was realizable and to do this he needed an engineer on board as a collaborator.

Peter Kemp ... was famous on the theatrical circuit for doing special lifts and turntables and things in the theatre world. And I thought I could go and consult him and ask him if he would join the team – this was all before we'd won it (Potter, 2007, E 00:23:13ff)

Potter was successful in pitching his concept; the art is in preserving it through thick and thin in the subsequent process of realization. The first danger period was when the content had to be further developed to meet the requirements of the funding body.

I think this was the first job that went through the Lottery process... [Heritage Lottery Fund] HLF. So we had to include some prime exhibits, best collection, in there to, you know, not just make it a theatre, to make it a museum (Potter, 2007, E 00:26:11+)

There is always a danger that, in elaborating the content and developing the detail of the exhibit, the concept might be compromised, diminished or disrupted, and lose its original clarity and power. Potter clearly retained control of the concept by taking the lead in this process.

I had these ideas of using figures in the foreground and developed them with Bob Bloomfield [the Natural History Museum's Head of Interpretation]... about how we could tell that story about how previous generations had perceived their own, home plant starting

with religion and working through myths and so forth (Potter, 2007, E 00:26:11+)

Potter also remained in control of the detail design process.

I worked for the next 15 months with Peter Kemp and my trusted draughtsmen, John Blurton, to create all the drawings and specifications (Potter, 2000, 160).

During the production and installation processes Potter also had to resolve several major problems. During building works the slate curtain walls lining the atrium had to be insulated to prevent condensation and, quite late in the installation process, the engineers requested one month to test the globe but only two days were allowed in the schedule.

These crises have the potential to push the project off course and destroy the integrity of the original concept. One thing Potter is very clear about is that he is the one responsible for preserving the concept; in this regard he makes no compromises; he is the 'artist' (Figure 2).



Figure 2 – Processional route through the avenue of sculptures to the escalator and rotating globe. Collection items and labels were incorporated into the tops of the glass hemispheres and into the walls of the atrium.

## Case 2: A Walk Through the 20<sup>th</sup> Century

Potter received a fax one day in May 1996 which led to an outright commission to work with the Portuguese Expo authorities on the 'Walk Through the 20<sup>th</sup> Century' exhibition. The exhibition was held at the Cultural Centre of Belém in Lisbon and was the centrepiece of the 100-day festival preceding Expo '98.

The project was a large one for a small practice to undertake and, indeed, Potter did expand his studio at this time by recruiting two exhibition design graduates, one of whom, Alison Stapley, did much of the creative development work on the project. However, two exhibits are of particular interest in the present context, because they engaged Potter himself in hands-on creative work. At the time he presented the incidents as illustrative of ‘crisis design’ but an alternative interpretation would be that they represent ‘artistic interventions’ that balance intellectual acuity with emotional response and artistic flair, skills at the very root of Potter’s practice as a conceptual designer.

### **‘New Ways to Die - New Ways to Live’**

Amongst the hundreds of exhibits loaned for the ‘Walk Through the 20<sup>th</sup> Century’ exhibition were works of art by some of the most important artists of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. However, not everything short-listed could be acquired in time; indeed, for practical reasons, some could not be acquired at all. One in particular, by American artist John Chamberlain, called ‘Scotch Vapor,’ which Potter had interpreted as being about car accidents, was withdrawn by the artist’s curator a mere four days before the show opened. The car crash represented a cultural theme linking a story about blood, organ donors and physical trauma specific to 20<sup>th</sup> century experience. Potter was furious; the work formed such a crucial link in the narrative on Health that something very creative had to be done within a day. An engaging sculpture immediately recognizable as an image of the car-crash was needed; in the catalogue of available works, there was no real alternative. It, therefore, posed an apparently insoluble problem for Potter.

The organizers wanted me just to leave it [out], but I felt it was such a key message, you know, blood transfusion, organ donors, car crashes, all of this century, I wanted to do something about it (Potter, 1998).

He explained how he resolved the problem:

I eventually got hold of two car doors and asked the forklift truck driver to run over them. I put them together, had a framed print of an organ donor card and a blood transfusion card built into it and just called it ‘New Ways to Die - New Ways to Live’ (ibid.) (Figure 3)



Figure 3 – the sculpture ‘New Ways to Die – New Ways to Live’ in situ next to the Derek Jarman painting ‘Blood’.

The ‘New Ways to Die: New Ways to Live’ sculpture probably did not survive; Potter suspects that he ‘threw it in the rubbish skip’ at the end of the ‘Walk Through the 20<sup>th</sup> Century’ exhibition.

### ‘Shooting Cameras’

At a key point in the exhibition there was to be an image of a woman by an artist who specialised in raising ordinary people to stardom and stars to mythical status. However, the chosen Warhol painting of Judy Garland was withdrawn. Unfortunately there was no budget to approach a museum for a replacement loan and Potter decided to produce something himself. However, this decision arose neither out of frustration nor on a whim. The response was in two parts, an *homage* to Warhol and a very personal address of the theme in the ‘Myth’ section of the exhibition dealing with fame, stardom and the creation of cultural icons. Potter created ‘Fifteen minutes of fame 1998’, a portrait of his wife Angela, to replace the missing Warhol image of Judy Garland. This is an unapologetic pastiche, which was accepted as far as we know without comment (Figure 4).





Figure 4 – ‘Fifteen minutes of fame 1998’ – Potter original in the style of a Warhol silk screen print.

The second part of the response is the main focus here. Potter had met Princess Diana on at least two occasions, both of which represented high points in his career, at the opening of the Museum of the Moving Image in 1988 and of the Ecology Gallery at the Natural History Museum in 1991. When Princess Diana was killed in a car accident in Paris, Potter felt a need to respond. Over and above any personal motivation, he thought of this as an obligation.

On a professional basis it suddenly left me with the need to create a new exhibit in "A walk through the 20th Century." It became obvious the Myth Section could not go ahead without including the Princess of Wales (Potter, 2000, 171).

Inspired by a photograph taken from above of the coffin in Westminster Abbey, he produced a canvas painted in oil and acrylic. The image was based on the design of a Shooting Cameras playing-card. The frame is integral to the work and has cameras and flashguns mounted on it, which fire whenever anyone approaches the work (Figure 5).



Figure 5 – ‘Shooting Cameras’ – the artist, Neal Potter, is shown setting off the flash-gun effect by approaching the work.

In the installation a letter box stuffed with popular gossip magazines was positioned below the work. Following the exhibition Potter donated the ‘Shooting Cameras’ painting to the Berardo Collection of Modern Art in Portugal. ‘The last thing I wanted was to make money from the painting’ (ibid.)

## Discussion

### Installation concept as art.

One way to think of the atrium of the Earth galleries at the Natural History Museum is, fairly straightforwardly, as exhibition design. It is an interior space in a museum used to communicate certain ideas about geosciences and to display part of the collection. The design has resolved a range of practical problems for the museum including a major visitor circulation issue – how to deliver visitors to the second floor of the museum so that they can filter down through the Earth galleries and experience the main collections and the narrative in a logical sequence.

The atrium installation can also be thought of as site-specific public art. It combines practical function and symbolic meaning and therefore lives on that boundary between sculpture and architecture. The hybridity of such art is its strength.

The somewhat novel aspect of the work is that it is inside a building; such large-scale works are usually sited in the landscape. Whatever the physical and cultural context, such art works have an autonomous quality. As well as addressing the contingent conditions of their inception and commissioning, they embody something enduring and touch on a universal human theme. At the heart of the atrium installation is the idea that all of human existence is packaged on this tiny planet isolated in the vastness of space; the thought is both fascinating and terrifying. It transcends



the narrative contingency of the gallery plan devised by the museum for the Earth galleries. This presents the possibility of re-interpretation in the future.

Returning to Potter's approach to creating such work, it is the concept that is imbued with power rather than the physical work. Potter has devised exhibit concepts in the past that have recurred, re-interpreted in several different projects (Figure 6).



Figure 6 – 'Back in Time' concept – this version was for a proposed Ingersol/Timex museum (1993). A clock face of video screens is used to communicate the idea of movement back (and forward) in time. The concept recurs in Potter's work several times. It was eventually realized in Singapore in the late 90s.

The Earth in Space concept holds the same potential. Through visualization the concept becomes the work of art.

### **The narrative gap**

To interpret the 'New Ways to Die – New Ways to Live' sculpture as an egotistical gesture I suggest would be a mistake. It can be seen, from the place it took in the exhibition, partnered with the Jarman painting, and the method by which it was produced, the manipulation of found materials to expressive effect, that the piece was knowingly created as a work of art. But it was also seen by Potter as a stop gap, as ephemeral. The reason for this is partly emotional and partly to do with the contingencies of his design practice.

The piece was conceived in a mood of anger and frustration, feelings which could have been taken out in unproductive ways, a rant, firing someone, or smashing up a bit of furniture. But Potter immediately turned this energy in a productive direction; watching a forklift truck drive over the car doors a couple of times must have been quite satisfying; having a purpose for doing so must have doubled the satisfaction.

In the aftermath of an exhibition, once the 'collection' has been returned to its owners and any system showcases and reusable equipment demounted and put into storage, what remains is largely waste and typically ends up in landfill and incinerators. For better or for worse, probably for worse, 'New Ways to Die – New Ways to Live' was not attended to and became part of the waste.

Potter always had problems as an art student with model making, and was much happier doing paintings or, in design terms, producing 'visuals' (Matthews, 2007, 77). Working directly in 3-D has never had much place in Potter's subsequent professional work and this may be, in part, the reason why the sculpture was overlooked. 'New Ways to Die – New Ways to Live', in Potter's mind had the same status as a contractor-produced exhibit; it was a piece of interpretation designed to fill a gap in the narrative and was, therefore, disposable.

## **Emotional response**

'Shooting Cameras' was a very different piece. It is possible that Potter was emboldened by the rather different atmosphere in Lisbon.

I remember working Portugal and we were treated almost like artists, rather than designers (Potter, 2007, I 01:23:59+)

He was not used to being treated as an artist. The norm, in the UK at least, is to be regarded at best as a consultant, whose advice one is free to take or leave, and at worst as some kind of superior technician, someone with special skills who can be told what to do.

...that's happened in other countries too. You feel as though you've been brought in for something specific and they're pleased to have you. Whereas, it doesn't feel like that in this country,...you feel like a technician rather than... as somebody [who] ...wants to do something original (ibid.)

When this artificial distance, represented by the artists' elevated and the designers' suppressed rôle in authorship is collapsed interesting things can happen. The decision to produce the painting seemed natural in the circumstances and it certainly worked in the context of the exhibition and the festival of which it was a part.

...the painting itself was well received within the exhibition and captured many peoples thoughts on the state of tabloid journalism (Potter, 2000, 171).

## **Conclusion**

These cases allow us to question some of the institutional categories and creative stereotypes that generally underpin the organization and execution of museum exhibition projects. In the case of the Earth galleries atrium installation, where the art is in the concept rather than its specific realization, the artist's rôle as 'visualizer' comes to the fore. In the 'Walk Through the 20<sup>th</sup> Century' exhibition the overarching rôle of the artist is as 'storyteller', one who provides a narrative framework which a variety of creative inputs then reinforce and provide substance. The

supplementary rôle adopted by Potter in creating the painting 'Shooting Cameras' is that of 'interpreter'; he takes a specific position on an issue and expresses this through an original work.

As I hope one can tell from the account in this paper, these roles are far from prosaic and, I would argue, are at least as useful as those proposed in the conference announcement as more characteristic of the artist as 'mediator,' 'provocateur,' 'informant' and 'fantasist.'

## Pop Goes the Weasel?

According to Jack (2008: 158-62) there are two alternative explanations of the nursery rhyme 'pop goes the weasel.' One connects with Cockney rhyming slang. Weasel (as in 'weasel and stoat' = coat) represents the only item of clothing that might be pawned to raise sufficient money for a night of drinking. The other connects with the involvement of Huguenot refugees in the textile industry in London. The spinner's 'weasel' was a wheel used to measure out yarn and which made a popping sound each time the required length was reached. In the eponymous musical hall song, the refrain is repeated at the end of each nonsensical verse. This may be taken as a wake up call, 'wherever your mind had wandered to, reality was never far away with the weasel to pop you alert again' (159).

With these interpretations in mind, I use the phrase metaphorically, in the present context, firstly to suggest that the coat that the artist wears as protection against the outside environment is a self-defining idea of creative autonomy. This may be pawned regularly to allow the artist to enjoy an excursion into the world of institutions, with all that that may imply in positive as well negative terms of loss of ego, social engagement, compromise and service. Secondly I use it to suggest that, whatever flights of imagination the artist may make, whether purposeful before or after the fact or, indeed, without any such rationale, reality will always come knocking at the door to remind us of the need to do what is necessary to survive.

The conference announcement implies that the first interpretation applies to most artists that venture into the museum. Neal Potter conforms more to the second interpretation. And he is a survivor.

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## **Acknowledgement**

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